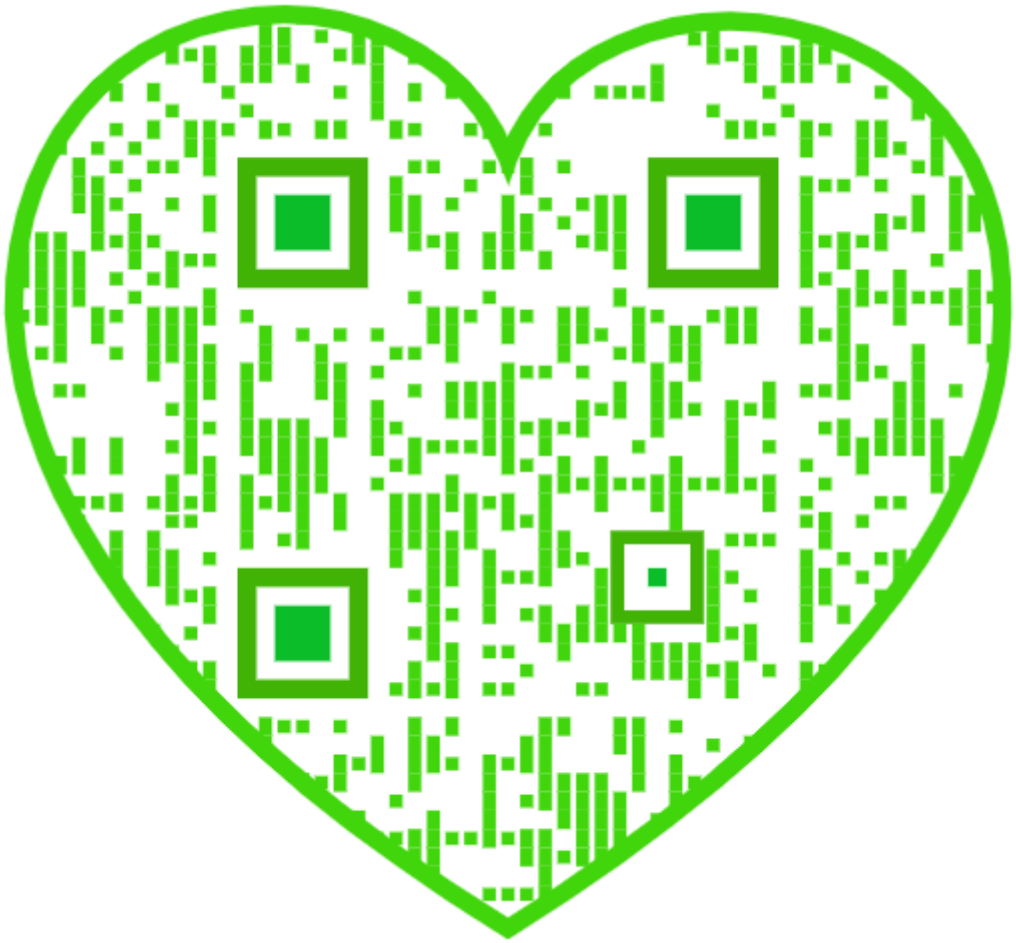
BV
45
G5

# A CHRISTMAS MEDITATION

LAWRENCE GILMAN



Class BV 45
Book .G5
Copyright No.

COPYRIGHT DEPOSIT.

# A Christmas Meditation

# A Christmas Meditation

By

Lawrence Gilman

New York
E. P. Dutton & Company
681 Fifth Avenue

BV45
G5

Copyright, 1916
by
E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY

OCT 28 1916

The Knickerbocker Press, New York

©Cl.A446145

AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED

TO MY BROTHER

JOSEPH GILMAN

IN RECOGNITION OF HIS INTEREST IN THESE

FUGITIVE REFLECTIONS ON AN

IMMEMORIAL THEME

# NOTE

The following reflections contain, in a revised and somewhat extended form, the substance of an editorial which the author wrote for the Christmas, 1910, issue of *Harper's Weekly*. He is indebted to the courtesy of the proprietors of the *Weekly* at that time, Messrs. Harper and Brothers, for permission to make this use of his contribution.

"They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more. . . . For the Lamb, which is in the midst of the throne, shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes."—Rev., vii.: 16, 17.

# A Christmas Meditation

AS the years take their ever-quickening passage across our hearts we are likely to find Christmas a more and more difficult ordeal for the spirit. No man or woman who has known the common lot of mutation and sorrow can face the day without misgivings, without a quailing of the soul for which there

need be no shame. The thronging memories of dead years are never so poignantly insistent as on that festival of festivals. The gayer our merriment, the braver our recourse to those pleasures that warmed the soul of Elia,—"the cheerful glass, and candlelight, and fireside conversations, and innocent vanities, and jests,"— the more importunately do we remember; the more vividly actual become that dear and silent company who take their places among us

on that day: whose eyes smile at us gravely, with incorrigible tenderness, across the laughter of those whose presence is so much less evident to our sense.

And how steady is the growth of that phantasmal gathering! How increasingly numerous are those unbidden but passionately wished-for guests, who have come before the lights are lit, who bring no gifts and can take none from our eager hands, who linger after the last footfall has

grown faint in the sharp air, who remain after the house is dark and still, empty but for ourselves and them! There are times for all of us when, recalling the terrible epigram of Victor Hugo,—that we are all under sentence of death, with an indefinite reprieve,—we wonder desperately how long it will be before the only guests we shall care to summon to our festivities are those who need no summons, for whom we need burn no lights: when our

thoughts may be as the thoughts of Alexander Smith, meditating alone on Christmas night: "I hear a sound as of light music, a whisk of women's dresses whirled round in dance, a clink as of glasses pledged by friends. Before one of these apparitions is a mound, as of a new-made grave, on which snow is lying. I know, I know! Drape thyself not in white like the others, but in mourning stole of crape; and, instead of dance music, let there haunt

around thee the service for the dead!"

It is upon this year's Christmas, perhaps, that we find ourselves looking into the firelight and saying to a beloved and close-held Memory, with an elegist of today: "There has been twilight here, since one whom some name Life and some Death slid between us the little shadow that is the unfathomable dark and silence." Or we are hearing, it may be, the ineffably pathetic voices of those children

of vision seen in the revery of Lamb: "We are nothing; less than nothing, and dreams. We are only what might have been. . . ."

Nor is Christmas, as we meet it after the going down of many suns, colored with no darker emotions than those of grief and elegiacal regret. To every man of sensibility, to every idealist, conscious or unconscious, —and who of us is not, in some fortunate hour, an idealist?—

the Christmases that come in our autumnal years are certain to be embittered by despondency over the unbridged gap between aspiration and fulfilment, over the lengthening record of our futilities and betrayals. The flood of affection and generosity that surges about us at this season dislodges and casts up from the hidden places of the soul a thousand memories of injustice and negligence, of harshness and egoism, which, we had fatuously thought, were

cancelled by the mere act of forgetfulness. The most buoyant among us know at times these moods of disheartenment that are the sombre corollary of the Christmas season. They cannot forget the lost hours that call to them reproachfully out of the past; they understand that haunted and touching cry of a poet of the Gael:

The dead are happy, the dust is in their ears.

But is there not a lucid intimation for the spirit in precisely this fact of Christmas melancholy? Surely the secret of happiness and the secret of peace lie folded one within the other; and the profounder significance that Christmas hides behind the gentle beauty of its pageantry—does it not reward the most moderately patient scrutiny, if only that be intrepid and unwavering and direct? It is the lesson that is taught by the ancient Wisdom of the East

when it tells us that our only hope of abiding happiness lies in our privilege of seeing it through other men's eyes: that this is the secret of peace. And what more shall you glean from that but the simple truth which was taught in Palestine: that only he who loses his life shall find it? We know that the precious things of the world fade and pass with the mere transit of the years. We know that the inexhaustible richness, fascination, and savor of life as-

sure to us, as individuals, no lasting happiness. "There's night and day, brother, both sweet things; sun, moon, and stars, all sweet things; there's likewise a wind on the heath. Life is very sweet, brother." Sweet, indeed, and infinitely desirable; but little to be trusted as a source of enduring personal delight. Through the night and through the day and across the heath may troop the ghosts of how many abortive hours—of how many unperformed kindnesses,

abandoned generosities, foregone ideals! The sublime rebuke of the stars can be intolerable. The wind, that mysterious awakener of the past, can bring an unutterable sadness upon the spirit. So that, in the end, we are tempted to cry out, with Shankara, "It is not this ! It is not this!"

But we look upon a new heaven and a new earth, full of serene and transforming light, when we come to understand

what was really meant by that behest to love our neighbor as ourself: when we perceive that, far from exhorting us to love him as we love ourself, it tells us—as one of the wisest counsellors of our time has revealingly put it—that we are to love him *as being ourself:* "In the splendid hour of illumination, we are alone in the silence and darkness of the immortal world. Yet not alone, for the inmost holy of holies is full of the souls of men. In that dread presence all are one, and

that one the Soul. . . . Thenceforward, we need not go abroad to find our other selves. They come to us, pressing closely round our souls, in vision or in blindness, in sadness or in mirth, in love or hate. But above love or hate or sorrow is the immemorial essence of our common soul . . . all move in the one Light."

It is as an indication of this august secret of human life that Christmas has its deepest and most exquisite

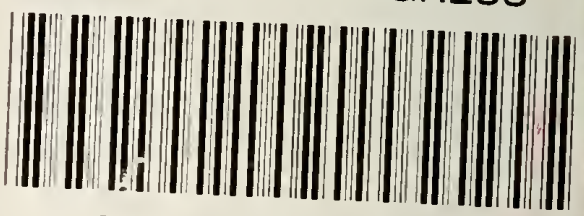
significance. It offers us a diviner opportunity than a mere provocation to generous and affectionate thought. For in the sudden radiance which it throws upon the world we may see, with a magical and tender clarity, those other souls that flock continually about our own: that are, indeed, ourself. We shall know, then, with a certainty beyond dismay, that in the Supreme Self, which is the Eternal, ourselves and all other selves are set, "as the rays are set in the Sun."

Deacidified using the Bookkeeper process.
Neutralizing agent: Magnesium Oxide
Treatment Date: August 2005

PreservationTechnologies
A WORLD LEADER IN PAPER PRESERVATION

111 Thomson Park Drive
Cranberry Township, PA 16066
(724) 779-2111

BV45

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

0 014 625 874 8